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Item 139 of the preliminary list**
Pattern of conferences

Pattern of conferences

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report contains information on procedures and activities relating to the pattern of conferences in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi.

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I. Introduction

1. In 2017, the conference management operations of the Secretariat continued to be focused on ensuring the quality, timeliness, cost-effectiveness, sustainability and accessibility of the services provided in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. The challenge was — and continues to be — achieving tangible progress in a budget-constrained environment. The deteriorating conditions of the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, for example, are severely hampering the utilization of meeting services there.

2. The nature of the work has continued to change. Non-calendar meetings now far outnumber calendar meetings at all duty stations, and the ongoing streamlining of the workflow and automation of various support functions in the translation services has fundamentally transformed the way in which their staff and contractors work.

3. Innovations in both meetings and documentation management were accordingly introduced in 2017 as part of the strategy of continuous improvement and modernization of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. Studies to calculate the full costs of meetings held away from headquarters of meeting bodies and to ascertain the technical feasibility of distance interpretation were undertaken. A new structure was proposed and approved for the translation services in New York with a view to capitalizing on the shift in working methods to optimize capacity and improve productivity, without sacrificing the quality of translation output. New technological applications were developed, and existing tools continued to be refined, both to streamline and expedite procedures for staff and to improve experiences for delegates. Targeted outreach was organized for the six competitive examinations held in 2017. Three of those were combined examinations for translators, editors, verbatim reporters and copy preparers, proofreaders and production editors, which will pave the way for more cross-assignments among language staff in the future. All recruitment tests for translators and other documentation staff were fully remote processes, with the latest technology in remote proctoring being applied in the final stages. Remote testing was also piloted in the preliminary stages of freelance interpreter testing. Technological options to increase the accessibility of meeting services were also explored, and a greater range of accessibility services were provided.

4. In recent years, the United Nations conference management operations at the four duty stations have firmly positioned themselves as industry leaders in technical innovation. Experience shows that only by leveraging the most advanced technological solutions can conference-servicing staff handle increasing demand with static resources. The results of the staff engagement survey for 2018 reflect the eagerness of the Department's staff to work on the frontier of technological progress. As the world's technological landscape evolves at unprecedented speed and we move into the fourth industrial revolution, conference services should continue to adapt and innovate.

5. Pursuing a harmonized conference management strategy requires full clarity as to the division of labour among the Secretariat's conference-servicing entities. Importantly, the mandated delineation of responsibilities among the four duty stations has finally been achieved. Henceforth, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management holds the authority to implement policies, formulate standards and guidelines, manage resources under section 2 of the programme budget and oversee operations at Headquarters, while the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi are responsible for ensuring the implementation of the policies, standards and guidelines set by the Under-Secretary-General and for managing the day-to-day operations at those duty stations. This new, decentralized model calls for results-based management, and a

working group has been established to review the key performance indicators of conference management operations in the light of the new arrangements and to ensure harmonization of the methodologies used in their calculation and capitalize on the data generated by the Department's technological tools.

II. Meetings management

A. Calendar of conferences and meetings

1. Adoption of the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2019

6. At its substantive session, in September 2018, the Committee on Conferences will review the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2019 (A/AC.172/2018/L.2) and transmit its recommendations to the General Assembly in its report for 2018 (to be issued as A/73/32).

2. Requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243

7. Requests to meet during the main part of the seventy-third session of the General Assembly have been received from six bodies thus far. In accordance with established practice, the requests will be reviewed by the Committee on Conferences, which will make a recommendation to the Assembly.

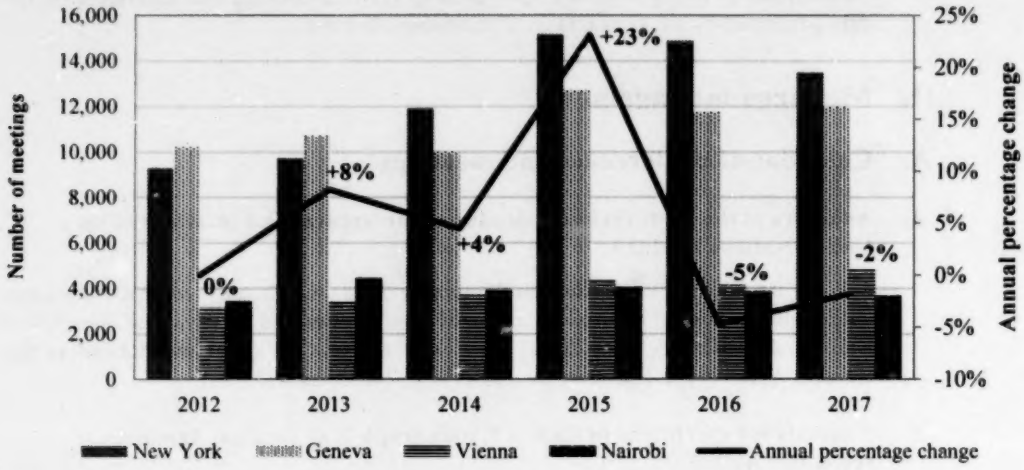
3. Intersessional departures from the approved calendar of conferences and meetings

8. The Committee on Conferences approved four requests for intersessional departures from the approved calendar of conferences and meetings.

B. Utilization of interpretation services and meeting facilities

9. The total number of meetings held at the four duty stations in 2017 decreased by 2 per cent compared with 2016, from 34,604 to 33,975, as shown in figure I. The number of non-calendar meetings, however, continued to increase dramatically at all duty stations, placing additional constraints on the resources allocated to calendar meetings. In New York and Geneva, non-calendar meetings represented approximately three quarters of the total number of meetings held in 2017. This marks a significant increase from 2012, when non-calendar meetings accounted for less than 60 per cent of the total.

Figure I
Total number of meetings held at all duty stations, 2012-2017



10. The deteriorating condition and limited capacity of the conference centre at the United Nations Office at Nairobi are affecting the Secretariat's ability to service the calendar bodies headquartered in Nairobi and the other major international meetings and conferences held there. The centre, which was built in 1984, comprises eight meeting rooms with capacities ranging from 20 to 550 persons. Only two of the rooms are equipped for interpretation in the six official languages. Six additional semi-temporary multipurpose rooms were built in 2007, with capacity for between 60 and 90 persons each. The total capacity is thus 1,884 persons. In 2013, the membership of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme, replaced in 2014 by the United Nations Environment Assembly, was expanded from 58 to 193 States. In 2017, participation in the third session of the Assembly exceeded 3,500 persons, making it necessary to erect and furnish tents and other temporary structures and supply them with electricity and information technology services. The main conferences of the parties to the multilateral environmental agreements have not met in Nairobi since the 2006 edition of the United Nations Climate Change Conference; the facilities are inadequate in terms of their size and capacity to handle the complexity of such conferences. The utilization of the conference facilities in Nairobi has steadily declined as a result, to 39 per cent in 2017.

11. The conference management and simultaneous interpretation system was upgraded from analogue to digital in 2009, and further upgrades to the sound insulation and ventilation of interpretation booths were carried out in 2012. The equipment is approaching the end of its life and support cycles in 2019, however, and is experiencing several system failures. In addition, certain spare parts are being discontinued. It is clear that dedicated resources to cover the maintenance costs will need to be provided expeditiously, given that, thus far, critical maintenance has been possible only through ad hoc financial support. Given the interdependence of equipment, furniture and overall conference infrastructure, any significant upgrades and replacements would require holistic planning among building, information technology and conference management teams.

12. The current conditions of the conference centre pose an immediate risk to the servicing of the main calendar events hosted in Nairobi: the sessions of the United Nations Environment Assembly and the Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). Both bodies will hold sessions in

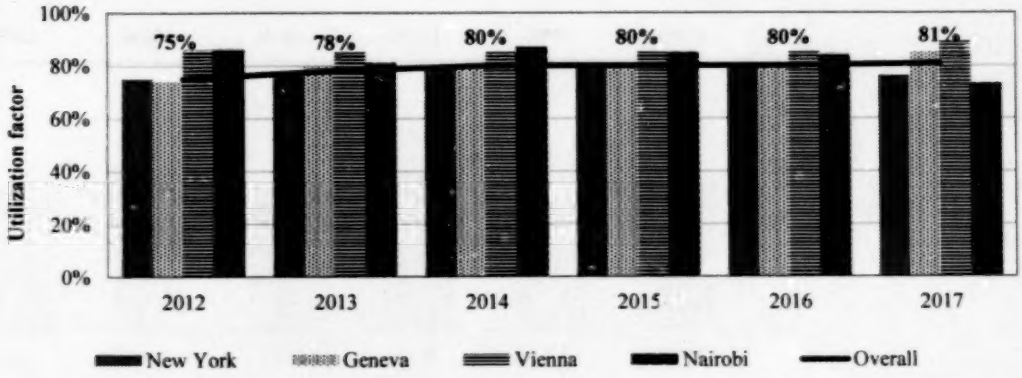
2019. The conditions also hinder marketing efforts to expand the client base to other Nairobi-based international organizations, along the same lines as the Economic Commission for Africa, which would increase utilization. The condition of the simultaneous interpretation equipment, meanwhile, prevents further exploration of distance interpretation options, which have the potential to increase interpretation capacity and hence the services offered by the Office.

13. The specialized furniture in the room allocated to the United Nations Dispute Tribunal is not suitable for meeting formats other than court hearings, and the room can therefore not be used for other purposes.

1. Analysis of utilization of interpretation resources by United Nations organs

14. The utilization of allocated meeting services by calendar bodies was closely monitored throughout the year by all four duty stations, which made proactive proposals for intergovernmental and expert bodies to rationalize their programmes of work and adjusted the allocation of their interpretation teams accordingly. As a result, the overall utilization rate reached 81 per cent, as shown in figure II.

Figure II
Utilization of interpretation services by all calendar bodies, 2012–2017



2. Provision of interpretation services to meetings of bodies entitled to meet "as required"

15. Compared with 2016, in New York the number of requests for interpretation in 2017 fell by 9 per cent, and the number of meetings provided with interpretation fell by 7 per cent, as shown in figure III. Both numbers were still 50 per cent higher than in 2012, and all requests for meeting rooms were met. In Geneva, the only body entitled to meet "as required" is the Human Rights Council, and all its requests for interpretation and meeting rooms were met, as shown in figure IV.

Figure III
Provision of interpretation services to meetings of "as required" bodies, 2012–2017

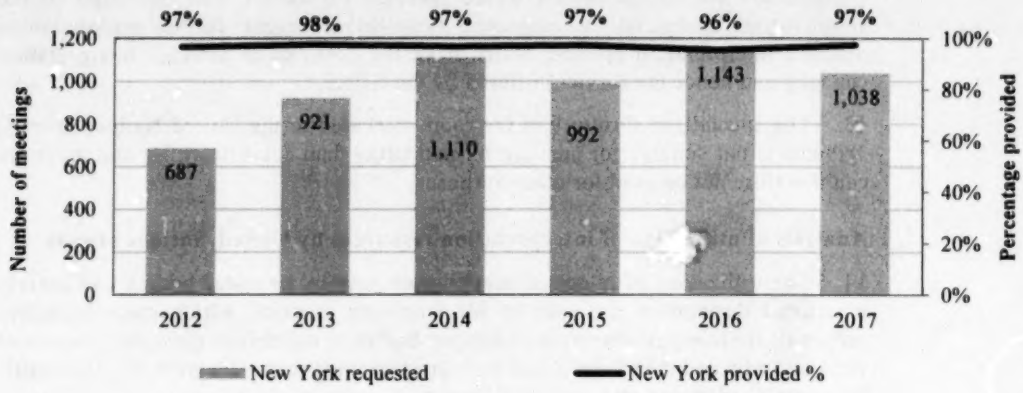
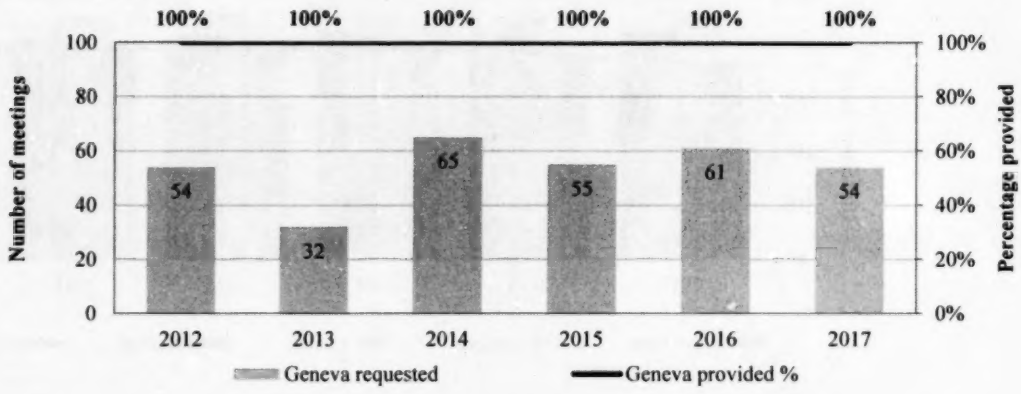


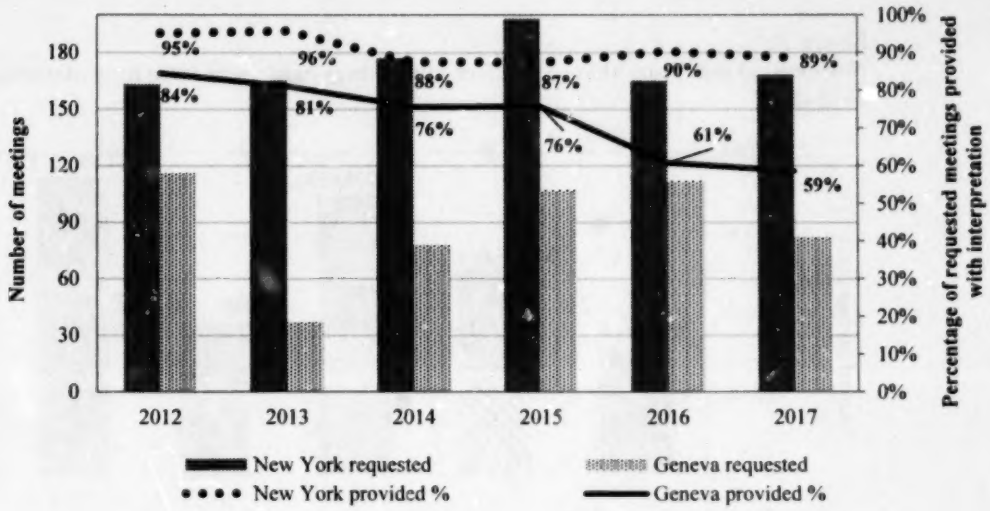
Figure IV
Provision of interpretation services to meetings of "as required" bodies in Geneva, 2012–2017



3. Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

16. All requests for meeting rooms made by regional and other major groupings of Member States were met in New York and Geneva. The provision of interpretation services to such groupings, which can be arranged only on an "if available" basis by using services released from cancelled calendar meetings, varied, as shown in figure V.

Figure V
Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States in New York and Geneva, 2012–2017



17. In New York, the number of requests for interpretation services was similar in 2016 and 2017, as was the proportion of requests that were met. The number of requests in Geneva fell by 27 per cent owing to the many preparatory meetings held in connection with the fourteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, in 2016. The percentage of requests met in Geneva fell slightly, by 2 per cent.

4. Utilization and improvement of the conference facilities at the Economic Commission for Africa

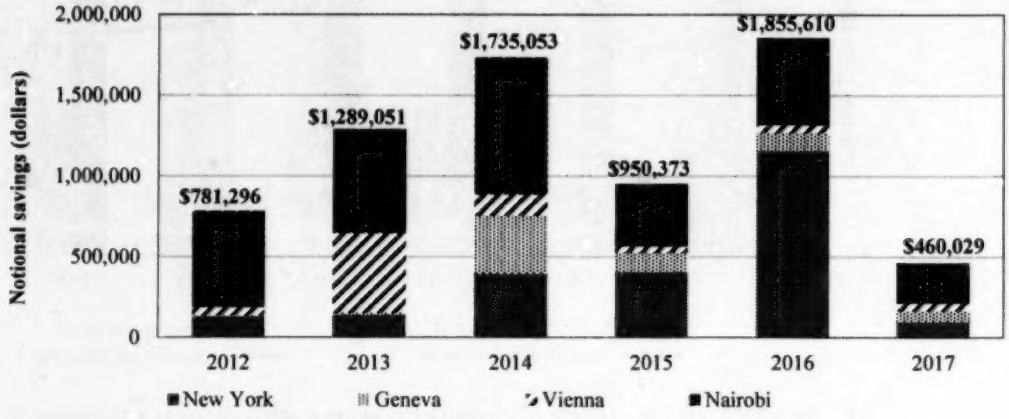
18. At the Economic Commission for Africa, the average total room utilization rate was 77.65 per cent. In accordance with the recommendation made by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (see A/71/571, para. 34), the calculation is now comparable with the four headquarters duty stations. The percentage of available conference resources used in 2017 remained high, at 90 per cent. Facilities will be improved with the installation of redesigned accessible podiums and adjustable lecterns in conference rooms 1 and 2 in 2019. The same rooms are also scheduled to be recarpeted in 2018. According to client feedback, however, urgent technological improvements are needed to ensure that the Commission maintains its ability to provide cutting-edge conference services. In addition, the premises must be renovated regularly. The city of Addis Ababa is expanding at an impressive rate, and several government and private sector projects to upgrade its capacity of convention, banqueting and exhibition venues are already in the pipeline. A capital investment plan to facilitate digital technology upgrades at the conference centre during the period 2018–2022 has been finalized. The Africa Hall renovation project is due to be completed in 2021.

5. Meetings held away from established headquarters

19. All duty stations continued to apply the integrated global management rule where appropriate. Savings of $460,029 were achieved by applying the rule in 2017, significantly less than in 2016, as shown in figure VI. This was mainly because far

fewer meetings were held away from established headquarters in 2017 (23) compared with 2016 (35). Most of the savings were accrued to host countries or other international or regional organizations that requested assistance from the United Nations; only 26 per cent of the total savings were accrued to section 2 of the programme budget.

Figure VI
Notional savings from shared services of meetings held away from duty stations, 2012–2017



20. The number of verbatim records produced by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management increased to 473 in 2017, compared with 435 in 2016 and 439 in 2015. The number of summary records produced in New York was 291 in 2017, compared with 328 in 2016 and 419 in 2015. In Geneva, the number of summary records produced was 600 in 2017, compared with 622 in 2016 and 580 in 2015.

21. Digital recordings continue to be available to any meeting body at its request. Three Vienna-based bodies entitled to written records continued to use digital recordings in 2017, with two of them using the recordings in lieu of written records. The number of visits to the relevant page with the audio player in 2017 was 57,740, compared with 89,752 in 2016 and 63,897 in 2015.

C. Innovations in meetings management

22. Several innovative ideas and improvements in meetings management were implemented in 2017. In New York, a one-stop-shop application for meeting requesters was developed within gMeets and rolled out in February 2018. It provides easy access to the full range of meeting services while enhancing coordination among service providers, thus achieving system-wide efficiency and effectiveness.

23. New applications, including access management, e-list of participants and committee place(s), were offered through the e-deleGATE portal to the plenary and the Main Committees of the General Assembly. These have not only streamlined the work of the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs Division, but also addressed the need for effective and secure channels between delegates and the Committee secretariats. The portal was expanded to the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions early in 2018.

24. In a pilot project to reduce photocopying and increase the sustainability of conference operations, the notes for the President of the General Assembly for plenary meetings were shared electronically with the interpreters a day in advance of each meeting and updated live during the meeting.

25. Various forms of technology were applied to enable the *Journal of the United Nations* to be published in all six official languages throughout the year and in a more user-friendly, digital version. The new system was rolled out on 2 January 2018.

26. The pilot of Indico, an open-source meeting registration and accreditation tool, was expanded at the United Nations Office at Geneva. The adoption of the tool by other United Nations entities, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, has further streamlined accreditation, reduced duplication and allowed the discontinuation of eight previous applications, while supporting the Organization's strict security requirements for access to the premises. The tool was also successfully used to manage accreditation and badging for remote conferences. It will be developed into the front end of the comprehensive system for conference and event management in Umoja.

27. The increased use of remote meeting participation and videoconferencing tools (where participants are not in the meeting room) has posed new challenges for the interpretation services, given that sound quality and ambient interference can make it very difficult for interpreters to perform optimally. A set of guidelines on technical requirements and standards for remote participation and videoconferencing was therefore prepared early in 2018 and shared with intergovernmental bodies and the relevant units of the Secretariat in New York, as was done in Geneva in 2016.

28. The practical and technical feasibility of distance, or remote, interpretation (where the interpreters are not in the meeting room) between the four duty stations was assessed. The ensuing recommendations include setting up a dedicated room at each duty station to trial distance interpretation and conducting proactive outreach to all stakeholders.

29. In Geneva, a tool to automatically determine the resource and financial implications of conference services, technical and support services of meetings and special events, based on the requirements specified by the user, was developed in 2017 and will be implemented in July 2018. The workflow for arranging interpretation support for field missions was also automated and streamlined early in 2018.

Use of United Nations premises

30. In New York, Geneva and Vienna, requests to use United Nations premises for non-calendar meetings and side events have continued to increase. The additional work generated by the many such events held at Headquarters placed a considerable strain on the meetings management services in New York in 2017. A study is therefore being conducted on ways to establish a mechanism whereby cultural activities, meetings and events not related to the intergovernmental process are charged for the associated costs, as they are in Geneva. In addition, a note verbale, in which a revised approval procedure for requests to use United Nations premises in New York was outlined, was circulated in March 2018, with a view to ensuring the smooth proceeding of calendar meetings and meetings of regional and other established groups of Member States and minimizing the wear and tear on conference rooms and the General Assembly Hall. The administrative instruction on the use of United Nations premises for meetings, conferences, special events and exhibits, dated 26 April 1996 (ST/AI/416), which currently guides the use of United Nations premises, will be revised to reflect the launch of the one-stop-shop solution for requesters of meeting services.

III. Documents management

A. Timely submission, processing and issuance of documents

31. Overall compliance by author departments with the deadlines for submitting slotted documents for processing (editing, translation and formatting) remained high in 2017, at 90 per cent, compared with 92 per cent in 2016, as shown in figure VII. In addition, compliance by the Secretariat with the four-week processing deadlines for documents submitted on time and within the word limits increased significantly, to 97 per cent, up from 88 per cent in 2016 and 70 per cent in 2015 (see figure VIII). Meanwhile, compliance with the issuance deadlines also continued an upward trend, rising to 92 per cent from 85 per cent in 2016 and 73 per cent in 2015, as shown in figure IX. It should be noted that, given that the adoption of the programme of work by the Fifth Committee is dynamic, for scheduling purposes the beginning of the main session (October) is considered the deadline for the submission of a large number of documents.

32. In New York, the proportion of mandated documents that could not be slotted in accordance with the 10-week submission rule, for reasons beyond the control of the Secretariat, has increased significantly since 2014. This had an impact on timely issuance, but was not reflected in previous reports. The 2015–2017 issuance data for New York presented herein are therefore calculated on the premise that timely issuance constitutes both issuance at least six weeks before consideration in the case of documents slotted according to the 10-week rule and issuance by the deadline agreed with authoring departments in the case of late-slotted documents. The data for 2015, 2016 and 2017 provided here for New York consequently vary from those reported in previous years.

Figure VII
Timely submission of slotted documents, 2012–2017

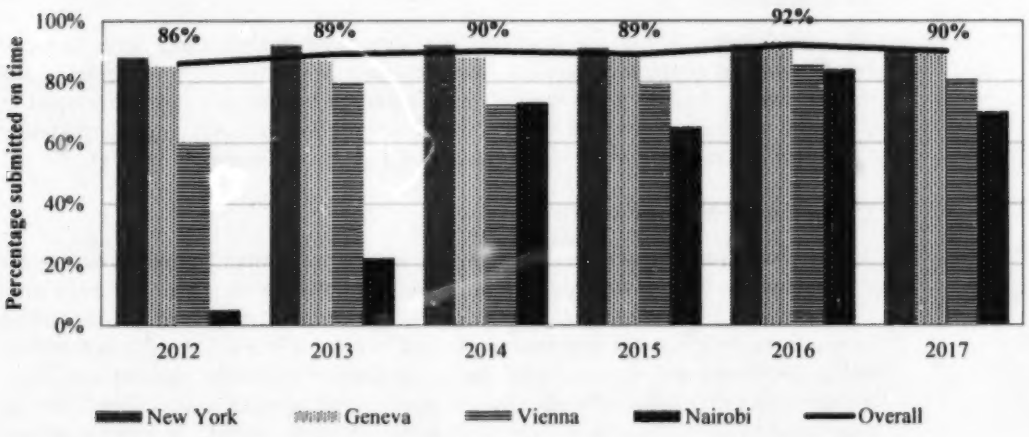


Figure VIII
Timely processing of slotted documents, 2012–2017

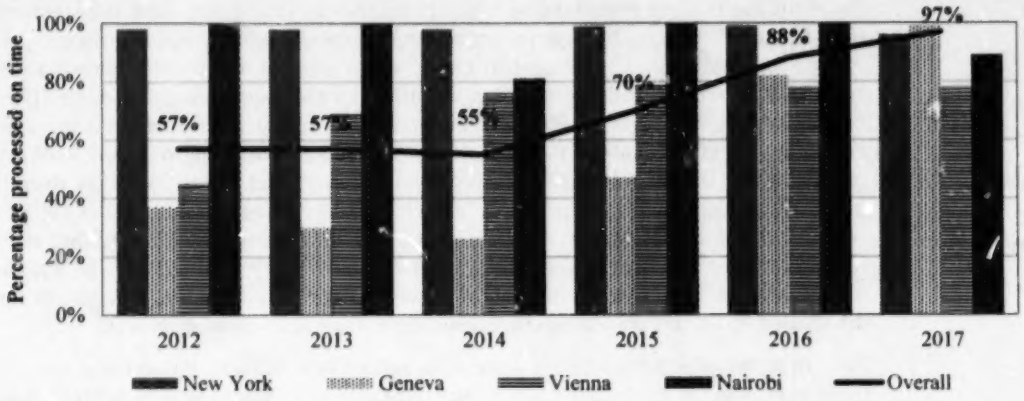
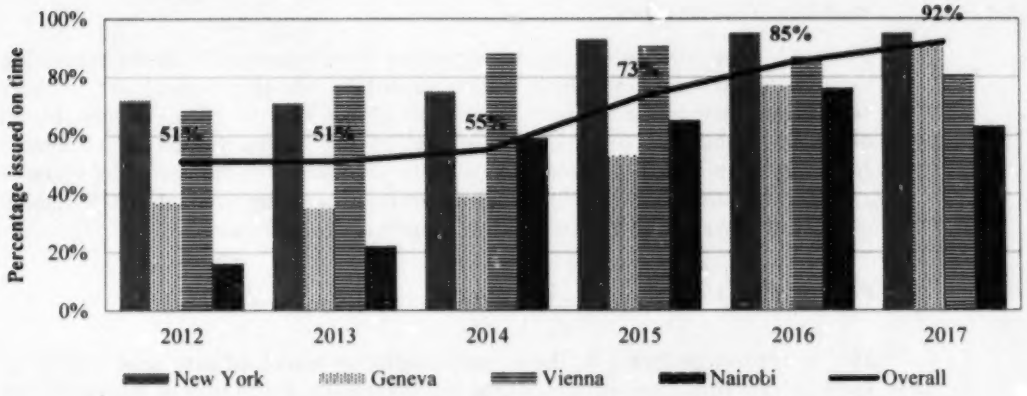


Figure IX
Timely issuance of slotted documents, 2012–2017



33. These results were achieved through concerted efforts on several fronts. In New York, consultations were held with author departments to submit reports earlier than the mandated submission deadline, where feasible. In addition, targeted advice was provided to entities whose submission compliance was below 90 per cent to help them to reach that benchmark in the future. In January 2017, a new procedure for approving and clearing the reports of the Secretary-General was implemented by, and requiring all such reports to be submitted to, the Executive Office of the Secretary-General for review before submission for processing. The Department also worked more closely with the secretariat of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions to improve the predictability of the submission of the Committee's reports to the Fifth Committee at the resumed seventy-second session of the General Assembly.

34. In Geneva, improvements in the reliability of submission forecasts and adherence to submission deadlines continued to be pursued through interaction with the substantive secretariats. In Vienna, submission compliance fell to 81 per cent, primarily owing to the complexity of some documents and lengthy clearance processes. In addition, several documents could not be slotted in accordance with the mandated time frame owing to local meeting patterns. The late confirmation of meeting dates had an impact on submission compliance in Nairobi.

35. On many occasions in 2017, unplanned, high-priority and often lengthy documents continued to place additional pressure on the Secretariat's processing capacity. In New York, 96 per cent of slotted documents submitted on time and within the word limits were processed in a timely manner in accordance with the standard time frame of 28 days. In Geneva, processing compliance improved significantly to 99 per cent, up from 82 per cent in 2016. All processing units at the duty station continued to benefit from the pipeline visualization tool (see para. 50), which offers cutting-edge monitoring, analytical and predictive functionalities. In Vienna, the nature and length of most of the non-secretariat reports emanating from the working groups of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law kept overall processing compliance at 78 per cent. In Nairobi, processing compliance was 100 per cent for the third session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, but only 25 per cent for the twenty-sixth session of the Governing Council of UN-Habitat owing to last-minute corrections and the requests made by substantive secretariats for documents to be embargoed pending decisions on the dates for the session.

36. In terms of issuance compliance with agreed time frames, the general upward trend continued in 2017. Timely issuance remained at 95 per cent in New York, and increased significantly in Geneva to 91 per cent, up from 77 per cent in 2016. The staggered submission of documents for long sessions, such as the Human Rights Council, continued to yield positive results, and has also been applied to selected meetings of other bodies.

37. In Vienna, alternative processing patterns were negotiated with the submitting departments and offices, which were accepted by Member States, and issuance compliance increased to 82 per cent, from 79 per cent in 2016. In Nairobi, all documents submitted for the third session of the United Nations Environment Assembly were issued in accordance with the six-week rule. However, the issuance of documents for the twenty-sixth session of the Governing Council of UN-Habitat was negatively affected by the very low submission compliance.

B. Control and limitation of the documentation workload

38. As shown in figure X, the overall translation workload rose only slightly in 2017. In New York, innovative measures for the control and limitation of documentation helped to reduce the translation workload by 3 per cent compared with 2016. Word limits were strictly applied and the processing of draft resolutions was streamlined to eliminate duplication. As a result, some 1.57 million fewer words were submitted for processing than originally requested by author departments, and the percentage of slotted documents complying with the established word limits rose to 80 per cent from 79 per cent in 2016, as shown in figure XI.

Figure X
Translation workload, 2012–2017

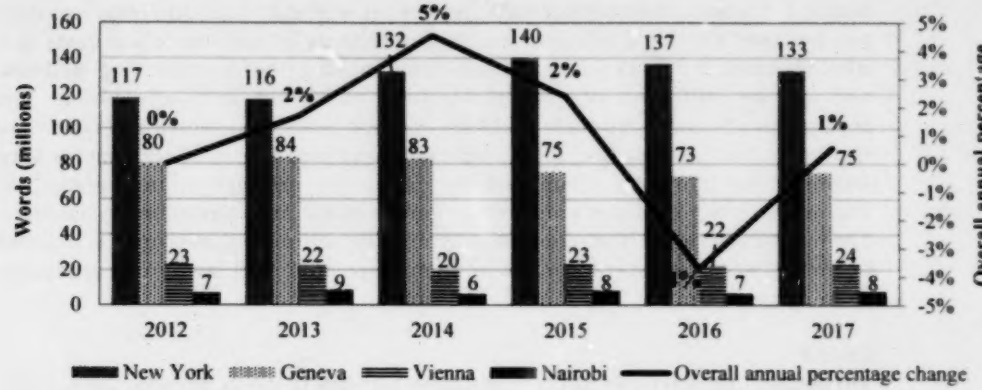
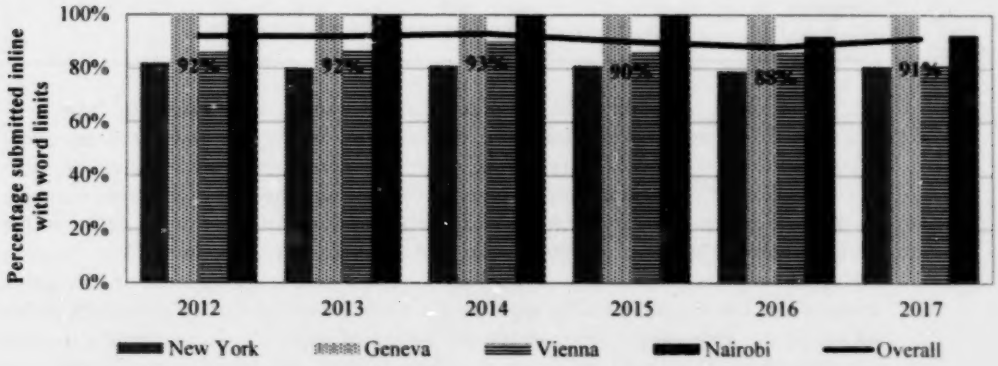


Figure XI
Documents submitted for processing in line with the mandated or recommended word limits, 2012–2017



39. In Geneva, an increase in documentation submitted by major clients for processing saw the translation workload in 2017 rise by 3 per cent compared with 2016. Word limits for all slotted documents have been respected since 2012. Waivers were granted only for seven reports of the Joint Inspection Unit that could not be slotted owing to their cross-cutting nature. The translation workload in Vienna increased by 8 per cent in 2017 compared with 2016, owing to the introduction of several new and extensive legal instruments, in addition to translation work received from other duty stations under the workload-sharing arrangement. Some 81 per cent of documents complied with the word limits, and those exceeding them reflected mainly the newly expanded reporting cycles of their related meeting bodies.

40. In Nairobi, the translation workload rose by 19 per cent compared with 2016. Most documents were submitted within the established word limits. The control and limitation of the translation workload and the general increase in the productivity of the translation services — thanks to the application of technological tools and new working methods — made it possible to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the documentation chain (see sects. C and IV.A).

C. Productivity

41. In previous reports, translation productivity was expressed as average individual output, i.e. words processed per staff member per workday. This individual rate does not, however, provide a full picture of the productivity of translation operations as a whole because it fails to reflect the full-chain impact of different working methods, such as the utilization of computer-assisted translation and self-revision. The application of customized tools (eLUNa) in recent years has enabled the translation services to both increase individual productivity and introduce more efficient working arrangements (such as self-revised translation by one person, as opposed to translation by one translator followed by revision of that same translation by another). The resulting gains are best reflected in terms of throughput productivity, i.e. the total number of words processed, divided by all the translation staff involved in producing them. These are shown for 2013–2017 in table 1.

Table 1
Throughput productivity of the translation services in pages per day, 2013–2017

Duty station	*2013*	*2014*	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*
New York	5.4	5.4	5.8	5.9	5.9
Geneva	5.3	5.1	4.8	5.1	5.0
Vienna	5.2	5.3	5.1	5.4	5.2
Nairobi	6.3	5.5	5.9	5.8	5.3

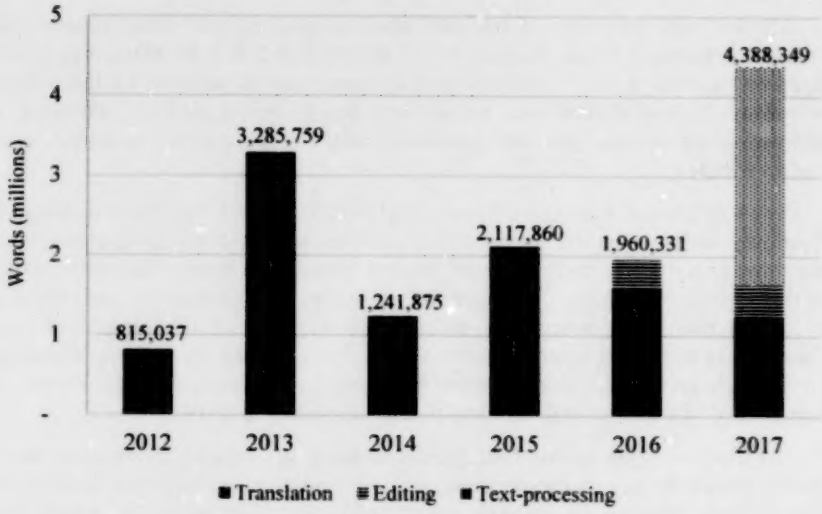
42. The surge in productivity recorded by the translation services in New York between 2014 and 2015 reflects the deployment of eLUNa and the consequent adjustment of working arrangements, such as more confident reliance on self-revision. The other variances between duty stations and the variations from one year to the next reflect differences in the local workload dynamics and in the nature of the texts translated and their intended use. For example, the peak in 2013 in Nairobi reflects situations of unusual workload received in a year that could not be forecasted adequately. The business model used by the United Nations Office at Nairobi relies on satisfying such surges through the utilization of more contractual work. In such circumstances, the small in-house translation team accordingly concentrates on workload management and quality control of contractual jobs while translating and revising only the documents demanding more internal expertise. With the increased sophistication and broadening of the scope and functionality of computer-assisted translation tools and their mainstreaming across the Secretariat's translation operations, the productivity rates at the other three duty stations are nevertheless expected to reach levels similar to those of New York in the next few years. The goal is for an increase in the overall productivity and effectiveness of the Secretariat's translation services to make it possible to absorb some unplanned workload and to further reduce reliance on temporary assistance at the two larger duty stations in the future. In conclusion, the investment in technology will enable translation staff to devote more time to higher value-added, non-repetitive tasks that are key to the fulfilment of their quality assurance mandate.

43. It should be noted that even throughput data provide only a partial picture of the efficiency gains, inasmuch as they do not reflect the gains generated in recent years by the automation of various translation support functions (e.g. the research and checking performed by reference assistants), which makes it possible to abolish some posts. This has already taken place in New York and will occur at the other duty stations in due course.

D. Workload sharing

44. The volume of workload shared among the duty stations is shown in figure XII. The surge in 2017 is the result of the addition, for the first time, of text-processing workload to the shared workload mix, which increased the total quantity of words shared in 2017 to 4.4 million words, up from 2.0 million in 2016. Concurrent activity peaks across the duty stations nevertheless still limit the Secretariat's ability to take advantage of workload-sharing opportunities year-round.

Figure XII
Workload sharing among duty stations, 2012–2017, in millions of words and by type



E. Simultaneous issuance of documents

45. One of the pillars of multilingualism is the simultaneous issuance of documents in all official languages. New York, Vienna and Nairobi achieved 100 per cent compliance in 2017, and compliance in Geneva reached 99.9 per cent, up from 80 per cent in 2016. It should be noted that these numbers do not take into account the instances when annexes were issued in one language only, in order to ensure the timely issuance of the report, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 47/202.

F. Digitization and uploading of important older United Nations documents

46. As at February 2018, 454,600 United Nations documents in all six official languages, representing 15.15 per cent of the 3 million documents identified as important and in need of digitization, had been digitized, catalogued and made available to the public, up from 12.8 per cent in April 2016. The effort is led by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library of the Department of Public Information, with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management providing scanning support.

G. Innovations in document processing

47. A number of innovative ideas and efficiency measures were implemented in the document-processing sphere in 2017. In connection with the launch of the *Journal of the United Nations* in all six official languages in New York as a year-round daily publication, special templates were created to expedite its translation. The suite of tools developed under the gText project continued to expand, offering terminology, referencing, text recognition, machine translation and quality assurance solutions to internal and external staff at all four duty stations and beyond. The editorial interface of eLUNa was launched in March 2017. The mechanism for loading documents in the Official Document System in New York and Geneva was improved to eliminate manual loading and ensure a swifter and more robust delivery of documents. The universal links to documents in the System were also modernized.

48. All the local data sets of the duty stations and regional commissions were successfully migrated to the global UNTERM portal in 2017. In 2018, they will be merged to produce a single multilingual database for all official United Nations terminology. Bilingual data sets are already being shared globally, allowing all translation services to use the same databases, which will increase consistency in the use of terminology.

49. A new document management system, gDoc2.0, is being developed in-house for all four duty stations. The aim is to establish a single end-to-end document management system that is connected to eLUNa and other production systems. This will simplify workflows and procedures, generate better business intelligence and facilitate workload sharing. Many procedures, including the contracting of external translators and the quality control of contractual translation, have already been standardized. The use of a single system will also represent economies of scale in terms of maintenance and upgrades. The new system is scheduled to be piloted in 2019.

50. The pipeline visualization tool, produced internally by staff using open-source software, provides easy-to-use decision-support analytics and has been used by the documentation services in Geneva since 2015. By helping to prioritize work effectively, it contributed to the steady and significant improvement of timely processing of documents at the United Nations Office at Geneva, which reached a record 99.3 per cent in 2017.

51. The Editing Section in New York continued its policy of requiring editors to consult responsible officials or delegations to clarify any grammatical or other irregularities whose correction could affect the substantive meaning of the text. Efforts were made to increase editors' awareness of the scope of stylistic changes, as well as to reach out to delegations to demonstrate the importance of editing resolutions to ensure consistency across the official languages, without making changes of a substantive nature to agreed texts of both draft and adopted resolutions, in accordance with Assembly resolution 72/19.

IV. Staffing

52. In pursuit of greater efficiency and sustainability, the conference managers of the Secretariat continue to take proactive measures to ensure optimal staffing, now and in the future, leveraging frontier technologies wherever possible.

A. Vacancies, recruitment and innovations in staffing

1. Vacancies

53. The vacancy rates by duty station in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2017 are presented in table 2, with the figures for 2016 presented for comparison in table 3. In nearly all cases, the vacancy rates fell, most notably in translation and text processing at Headquarters. Two of the three posts in translation in Nairobi were filled in the first part of 2018, bringing the vacancy rate down to 5 per cent. The vacancy rate in interpretation in Nairobi remained high at 37 per cent, however, largely owing to the lack of P-4 posts and, hence, of a career path for interpreters at the duty station. The United Nations Office at Nairobi continues to actively review the language rosters as they are published and to advertise internally and externally to attract qualified applicants, with these efforts reducing the vacancy rate to 15.8 per cent in the first half of 2018.

Table 2
Vacancy rates in key occupational groups by duty station, as at 31 December 2017

	New York		*Geneva*		*Vienna*		*Nairobi*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Interpretation services	9	7	5	5	1	4	7	37
Translation services	31	9	10	6	5	12	3	14
Text-processing units	17	14	17	19	1	3	3	14
Editing, terminology and referencing	2	7	2	10	–	–	–	–
Verbatim reporting	3	6	–	–	–	–	–	–

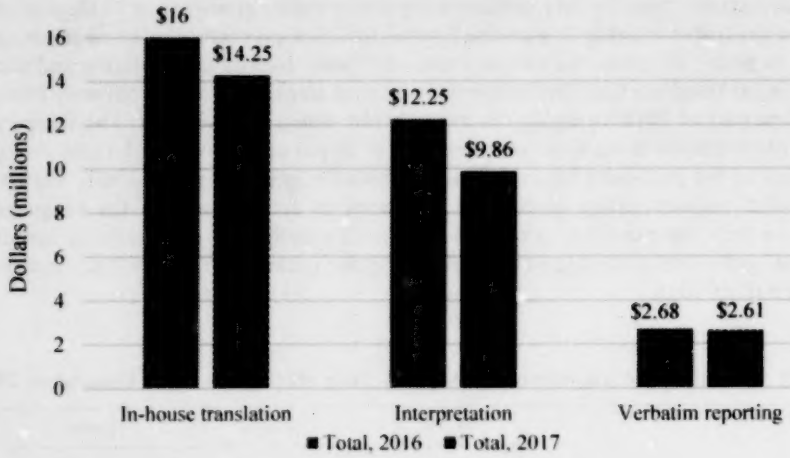
Table 3
Vacancy rates in key occupational groups by duty station, as at 31 December 2016

	New York		*Geneva*		*Vienna*		*Nairobi*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Interpretation services	8	6	8	8	–	–	7	37
Translation services	45	14	9	5	2	5	–	–
Text-processing units	24	20	9	10	1	3	–	–
Editing, terminology and referencing	1	4	1	5	1	17	–	–
Verbatim reporting	4	8	–	–	–	–	–	–

2. Temporary assistance for meetings

54. Temporary assistance for meetings is used to retain qualified freelance language professionals to handle surges in workload and to cover temporary in-house capacity shortfalls. The associated expenditures therefore vary considerably from one language service to the next. Thanks to the efficiency gains generated in translation by the application of technology and new working methods and concerted efforts to increase the rosters of local freelances, among other factors, the Secretariat has been able to reduce its expenditures on temporary assistance across the four duty stations for in-house translation, interpretation and verbatim reporting by $1.8 million (11 per cent), $2.4 million (19.5 per cent) and $70,000 (2.6 per cent), respectively, recording an overall decrease of $4.21 million (13.6 per cent) between 2016 and 2017 (see figure XIII).

Figure XIII
Expenditures on temporary assistance for meetings by occupational group, 2016–2017



3. Recruitment

55. Six language competitive examinations were held in 2017, resulting in 143 language professionals being rostered for subsequent recruitment in 2018, a far higher yield than in previous years in some languages. Three of the examinations were combined examinations for translators, editors, verbatim reporters and copy preparers, proofreaders and production editors, whereby successful candidates are placed on a single roster for subsequent recruitment and loan or transfer to any of these functional areas. The deployment of the gText suite of tools across all duty stations, the progressive introduction of interfaces for editing and other language functions in eLUNa and the development of an online training tool will further support the creation of a versatile workforce in the documentation services capable of transferring across functions and serving where most needed.

56. Building on the success of the examinations for Spanish translators in 2016, all the combined examinations in 2017 were fully remote tests, accessible to any qualified applicant with a computer and an Internet connection, including persons with physical disabilities. This more than doubled the number of applicants, from 3,203 the previous time that these three examinations were held as pen-and-paper tests, to 6,739 in their first wholly online incarnation. Moreover, the proportion of applicants from traditionally underrepresented regions rose notably, from 20 to 33 per cent in the English examination and from 25 to 47 per cent in the French examination. There was also a notably higher proportion of applicants from Australia and New Zealand in the English examination, again demonstrating the increased accessibility of these online examinations. The use of a remote tool for testing interpreters is being trialled in 2018. In addition to the competitive examinations held to fill rosters, ad hoc tests were organized to recruit temporary freelance staff.

4. Innovations in staffing

57. In New York, the implementation of a fully electronic workflow and the automation of various functions through the gText suite of tools has made it possible to redeploy translation support staff to activities with higher added value. At the same time, the extensive use of eLUNa, which allows direct access to terminology and other

reference materials, has shortened the learning curve of substantive aspects in translation, as several of the reference checks performed by translators are now also automated, enabling new recruits to begin self-revising sooner. The Secretariat therefore proposed, in the context of the biennial budget review at the end of 2017, that the translation services shift towards a diamond-shaped staffing table, which relies more on self-revision of translation work than on the two-level process of translation followed by revision. This reorganization was welcomed by the General Assembly in December 2017 in its resolution 72/261 and will be implemented first at Headquarters in 2018 and subsequently at the other duty stations. By reflecting the reality of the new working methods brought about through the progress of the computer-assisted translation tools developed in-house and by eliminating previously required but currently redundant steps in the processing chain, this shift is expected to ultimately improve timeliness, quality and efficiency. The staffing table in each service will henceforth thus have more self-revising translator posts and fewer translator posts.

58. Several actions were taken to prepare for the restructuring in New York, take advantage of the fully electronic workflow and optimize capacity use. Each translation service assumed responsibility for the assignment and quality control of contractual work in its language, and members of the former Contractual Translation Unit were redeployed. With the full automation in eLUNa of the research functions performed by language reference assistants, vacant posts were abolished and encumbered posts redeployed to other areas, including in other divisions in need of additional staff. Following the abolishment of a D-1 post, the text-processing units were merged with the respective translation services, and the Editorial Service was merged with the English Translation Service. These merges, coupled with a new combined language examination, make cross-assignments for editors and translators increasingly feasible, yielding a more flexible workforce. Given the increased automation of language functions, two computational linguist posts were created to support the continuous improvement of language tools. In addition, work began on the development of an online training tool targeting language staff at all levels, as well as university students, potential recruits and external contractors.

59. The pilot outposting to Vienna of five members of the French Translation Service in New York ended early in 2018. The project achieved its goal in terms of staff retention, but the absence of two P-5 senior revisers placed an excessive burden on the remaining staff at the P-5 level in New York. Those two posts will therefore be returned to New York, while the other three will remain in Vienna for a further two years, whereupon the usefulness of the arrangement will be reassessed.

60. In the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs Division, the introduction of staggered working hours and more cross-branch assignments drastically reduced the use of overtime and compensatory time off.

B. Reaching out to potential recruits

61. The Secretariat has continued to use social media, in all the official languages, to raise awareness of career opportunities in conference services at all duty stations. The network of universities that have signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations on training language professionals continued to yield positive results: nearly 43 per cent of those successful in the language competitive examinations conducted in 2017 had graduated from such universities. The Secretariat introduced new modes of cooperation in 2017, including remote practicum agreements that offer, in a cost-effective way, practical experience to promising translation students from partner universities.

62. The activities of the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation have considerably increased access to high-quality tertiary education in Africa through the establishment of Master's degrees in interpretation and translation at five universities. Thus far, 52 female and 73 male graduates have completed the two-year programmes. The train-the-trainer activities and mentoring, together with inter-university exchanges on the continent and with Europe, have increased local training capacity. The availability of qualified graduates contributes to the overall development strategy of increasing quantitative and quality skills to supply job markets both within Africa and globally.

V. Facilities and accessibility

63. The Secretariat sought to ensure greater accessibility of the meetings of direct relevance to persons with disabilities in 2017, such as meetings in New York of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, dedicated meetings of the Human Rights Council, meetings of the States parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other events at which extrabudgetary support was provided. A wide range of accessibility services, such as captioning, sign language interpretation, on-demand Braille embossing and accessible documentation, were made available to the Committee for its meetings in Geneva, together with targeted services for its members.

64. Meetings that required accessibility were accorded priority for live captioning services, and accessible conference documentation and websites, as well as national and international sign interpretation, were provided for meetings of bodies entitled to such services. The existence of around only 20 international sign interpreters accredited by the World Federation of the Deaf makes expanding such services extremely difficult. The technical feasibility of remote sign interpretation was tested in trials by the Secretariat. However, the modality may not be suitable for all meetings and has not yet been accepted by accredited international sign interpreters. Meanwhile, live remote captioning is more affordable, reaches a much wider audience and offers benefits for broader audiences in the form of an instant transcript of the meeting. Aware of the increasing interest in and demand for accessible documents for persons with disabilities, in particular in plain language and Easy Read, and in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Division of Conference Management in Geneva strengthened its collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2017 and conducted a joint pilot project to study the cost and feasibility of providing plain English versions of a selection of core documents of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

65. The Secretariat ensures that meeting documentation is available in accessible formats to the extent possible, including by using the screens in the conference rooms and United Nations Television. Measures were taken to make United Nations websites accessible. In terms of physical access, arrangements were made to provide adequate seating for wheel-chair users in the General Assembly Hall, and an accessible ramp was installed for the rostrum. This allows dignified and barrier-free access for participants when they address the Assembly.

66. To continue to improve the accessibility of conference services, the Interdepartmental Task Force on Accessibility launched a survey soliciting feedback from all users of Headquarters facilities in New York on their accessibility. The responses are being used to develop a detailed plan for improving accessibility that will begin with the General Assembly Hall. Accessibility-related improvements to the conference facilities in Geneva remain one of the priority objectives of the strategic heritage plan for the renovation of the Palais des Nations and building E. The design

phase is well advanced, and construction is scheduled to begin in 2019. Details of facility improvements in general and those relating to accessibility in particular will be reported under the relevant agenda items.

VI. Measuring the quality of conference services

67. To measure the quality of the conference services that it provides, the Secretariat collects feedback from Member States through global e-surveys, annual informational meetings and ad hoc surveys organized at each duty station. In 2017, 91 per cent of all respondents to the year-round global e-survey rated the overall quality of the conference services provided by the Secretariat as either "good" or "very good", with the proportion ranging from 88 per cent (of 8 respondents) in Vienna to 92 per cent (of 89 respondents) in New York and 96 per cent (of 28 respondents) in Geneva. In Nairobi, the global e-survey was conducted after the twenty-sixth session of the Governing Council of UN-Habitat, and 70 per cent of the participants rated the conference services as "good" or "very good". To supplement the global survey with real-time data, a survey was also carried out after the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Minamata Convention on Mercury. In that instance, 98 per cent of respondents rated the services as "good" to "excellent", while 2 per cent rated them as "fair". In other supplementary surveys, 87 per cent of the 315 respondents to a questionnaire in Geneva gave a rating of "good" or "very good" and, in New York, in a separate survey of the bureaux of intergovernmental and expert bodies to which the Secretariat provided technical secretariat and conference services, 26 out of 27 respondents expressed satisfaction with their quality and timeliness.

Informational meetings with delegations in 2017

68. Language-specific informational meetings with representatives of permanent missions were held in New York in August 2017 as a forum for discussing the conference services provided in each of the six official languages. The attending delegations expressed appreciation for the excellent language services rendered and stressed the importance of maintaining high quality and using correct terminology. The informational meeting held in October 2017 in Geneva was attended by more than 70 representatives of permanent missions. Participants at the meetings held in Vienna in 2017 expressed their continued support for the principle of multilingualism, noting that the services of interpreters and translators were critical to communication between technical experts and that cooperation between such experts and language staff should be encouraged to facilitate terminology coordination. In its scheduled informational meeting, the Division of Conference Services in Nairobi presented the status of preparations for the third session of the United Nations Environment Assembly.

69. The importance of reducing the speed of speech delivery and of providing written statements in advance, for the sake of interpretation quality, was stressed at all the informational meetings and in other instances. A study conducted by the Verbatim Reporting Service in New York revealed that the number of words per hour had increased by 58 per cent between 2005 and 2016 to more than 112 words per minute. At such speeds, it is extremely difficult to provide complete and accurate interpretations of the original speech.

VII. Conclusions, recommendations and proposed next steps

A. Conclusions

70. The Secretariat continued to introduce important innovations in its conference-servicing operations and recorded notable achievements in several areas in 2017. Capitalizing on the benefits afforded by technology, new tools and procedures were developed and introduced by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to improve the efficiency and quality of documentation, the accessibility of its services and the reach of its recruitment activities. The launch of the *Journal* in all six official languages and the development of the one-stop-shop solution in gMeets, as well as new applications in e-deleGATE, have enhanced the conference experience for delegates. By continuing to harmonize the tools and systems used at all locations and by introducing combined recruitment examinations for translators, editors, verbatim reporters and copy preparers, proofreaders and production editors, the groundwork was laid to increase workload sharing and build a more flexible workforce, one capable of performing multiple functions across multiple time zones. Moreover, an important delineation of responsibilities for conference services was achieved among the four duty stations.

71. These advances are overshadowed at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, however, by the dire conditions of its conference facilities, which are preventing the duty station from fulfilling its potential as a provider of meeting services and, in practicality, from properly fulfilling its mandate.

72. In 2018 and beyond, the Secretariat will continue to leverage technology in order to modernize, optimize and harmonize the workflows at all duty stations and concentrate its highly skilled human resources on the high value-added processes at which they excel. The new staffing structure in the translation services will be phased in to improve the timeliness and quality of document processing at all duty stations, with the support of online and other training tools and new technological applications. The conference management operations of the Secretariat will continue to foster the flexibility and development of their staff through cross-assignment and other initiatives, and new mechanisms for addressing persistent vacancies in certain services and at certain duty stations will be considered. Work will continue on gDoc 2.0, which, as an end-to-end system, will further streamline and optimize the documentation workflow, creating opportunities for greater efficiencies in the near future. Furthermore, the high-quality business intelligence generated by an automated flow of data in real time on the entire document management system, including the associated production systems, will make it possible to optimize strategic and managerial decision-making under the new delineation of responsibilities and decentralized model of conference-servicing operations. Work will also continue with Member States to raise awareness of ways in which they can facilitate the work and help to maximize the quality of the Secretariat's language services.

B. Action recommended of the General Assembly

73. **The Secretary-General recommends that the General Assembly:**

(a) Take note of the report;

(b) Note the delineation of responsibilities in the provision of conference services agreed to by the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi;

(c) Take note of the information provided about the condition of the conference centre at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and request the Secretary-General to submit a proposal for addressing the matter expeditiously;

(d) Note the steep increase in the number of requests to hold meetings and events not related to the intergovernmental process on United Nations premises in New York and of the need to update the policies governing the use of those premises.